

41. The Ascension (Luke 24:31; Acts 1:1-11)

Introduction

I had determined some time ago that this message on the ascension of Jesus Christ would be the conclusion of this series on the life and ministry of our Lord. When I began a serious study in preparing for this message, I came to a distressing realization: the ascension of the Savior was not considered worthy of emphasis by any of the gospel writers.

You will read the entire gospel of Matthew without finding any direct reference to the ascension. The same is true for John's gospel. The book of Mark condenses this event into only one verse, and if you consult the commentaries, they will tell you that this verse may not be authentic. Luke's gospel, in very general terms, relates this final event in the life of our Lord in one verse. I must conclude that for some reason the ascension was not considered essential to the purposes which compelled the gospel writers to record their accounts of the life and ministry of the Master. The purpose of this study is to answer the obvious question, "Why?" "Why do none of the gospel accounts make much of the ascension of Jesus Christ?"

Why Was the Ascension of Our Lord Not a More Important Theme in the Gospels?

Let me try to identify some of the reasons for this lack of emphasis on the ascension in the gospel accounts. While these reasons are largely inferential, they do help us to see this matter through the eyes of the gospel writers.

First and foremost, the purpose of the gospels is revealed in their title, 'the gospel.' That is, the authors of the gospels set out to present the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Technically speaking, the salvation was procured by the death of Christ and proved by the resurrection. The ascension did not directly contribute to the work of the cross in such a way as to be instrumental in achieving the salvation of men.²³³ In the light of the writers' purpose to portray the good news of salvation, any part of Christ's life and ministry which does not directly relate to their purpose would pale in the shadow of the death,

burial and resurrection of our Lord. It is not that the ascension of Christ is unimportant, then, but that it is largely irrelevant to the purpose of the gospel accounts.

Second, the ascension of Christ was not a favorite topic for those who were so intimately involved with Him. As John put it,

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, ...” (1 John 1:1-3).

Unlike Christians today, the disciples lived and walked and talked, and touched the Savior while He was on the earth in bodily form. Whenever He talked of departing them or leaving them, they were deeply distressed (cf. John 16:6,22). It was not something they wanted to happen, or that they wanted to think about.

Those of us who have had Christian loved ones die can understand the feelings of the disciples concerning the Lord’s ascension. While we know that God’s will has been done and that those who have died in Christ are with the Lord, we personally sense the loss of the presence of our loved ones who have departed, even though we anticipate spending eternity with them in the presence of our Lord. We do not, therefore, find great comfort or joy in reminiscing over the departure of our loved ones. So, too, I believe the gospel writers did not have any predisposition to write of our Lord’s departure to return to His Father.

Third, the ascension does not serve as a fitting conclusion to the life and ministry of our Lord. It somehow seems anti-climactic in the light of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. It tends to conclude on a note of sorrow and separation rather than of joy, victory, and triumph.

What, Then, Is the Meaning of the Ascension?

We have seen that the gospel accounts hardly mention the ascension, and we have suggested several reasons for this to be the case. While the ascension may not be prominent in the gospels, it is paramount in the book of Acts. While Luke did not emphasize it at the conclusion of his first book (Luke), he highlighted it at the beginning of his second volume (Acts).

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had

promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth. And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven" ([Acts 1:1-11](#)).

One of the most significant words in the book of Acts is that little word "began" in verse one. The first account, which was the gospel of Luke, was the report of what Jesus began to do and to teach. The book of Acts records what our Lord continued to do and to teach through His body, the church.

We are guilty of misunderstanding the words of our Lord upon the cross, when He cried out, "It is finished" ([John 19:30](#)). The Savior could truly say "It is finished" with regard to the work of redemption, which was accomplished on the cross. According to the usage of this expression man's debt for sin could be marked "paid in full." But the Lord Jesus did not say, "I am finished" in the sense that His work on earth was completed. Only His work of procuring men's salvation was finished. The work of proclaiming that salvation to men is still going on. That is what Luke meant when he spoke of what our Lord "began to do and teach" in the introduction of his second volume. The exciting thing to realize is that the ascension of our Lord was vital to the continuation of our Lord's work on earth through His body, the church.

While the provision for man's salvation was the work of our Lord which was completed on the cross of Calvary, the proclamation and application of the benefits of this work have continued through the centuries, through the church, the body of Christ. The ascension of Jesus Christ was central to the initiation and continuation of this work.

From a casual reading of the gospel accounts one would get the impression that Jesus ascended to His Father shortly after His resurrection. In Acts we learn that there was a period of 40 days that our Lord continued to manifest Himself to His disciples on the earth: "To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the Kingdom of God" ([Acts 1:3](#)).

The purpose of this forty-day period was three-fold as described in verses 3-5 of Acts chapter 1. First of all it was designed to convince the disciples of the fact of our Lord's physical, bodily resurrection (cf.

verse 3 above).

The remaining chapters of Acts reveal that the central truth of which the disciples were fully-convinced was that Jesus, though put to death, had risen from the grave.²³⁴

“This man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power” ([Acts 2:23,24](#)).

“But you disowned the Holy and Righteous one, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of Life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses” ([Acts 3:14-15](#); cf. also 1:22; 4:2,10; 5:30-32; 7:56-60).

‘Many convincing proofs’ which happened over a substantial period of time, in a variety of circumstances, to a diverse number of people (cf. [1 Corinthians 15:4-8](#)), served well the purpose of convincing the disciples of the fact of our Lord’s resurrection.

A second purpose of the forty day period after the resurrection was to command the disciples.

“... appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, ...” ([Acts 1:3,4](#)).

There was much that the disciples could not understand about the life and ministry of the Lord until after His death and resurrection. Now He could speak plainly of His work upon the cross and they could understand His teaching. But even now there were truths that they could not bear. Only after His departure, after the promised Holy Spirit came upon them, would they comprehend the great truths of the gospel. For this reason, Jesus commanded the disciples to wait until the promised Spirit was sent.

Third, the forty days enabled our Lord to clarify and correct certain misconceptions held by the disciples.

“And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, ‘Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’ He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth’” ([Acts 1:6-8](#)).

The Kingdom was a prominent theme in Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist came before Jesus and introduced Him as the King of Israel (cf. [Matthew 3:2](#); [Mark 1:2-3](#)), as well as the Lamb of God. Jesus frequently spoke of the Kingdom (cf. [Matthew 5-7,13](#)). The disciples were preoccupied with the subject, and particularly their role in it (cf. [Matthew 19:28](#); [Mark 10:37f.](#)). The religious leaders accused Jesus of being a king or of claiming a kingdom ([John 19:12](#)) and this Pilate acknowledged ([Matthew 27:37](#)). The thief on the cross asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His Kingdom ([Luke 23:42](#)).

Little wonder that the disciples should persist in bringing up the subject of the Kingdom after the resurrection. They were certain that it must be forthcoming. Our Lord found it necessary to clarify His teaching on the Kingdom that was to come.

Mark it well; Jesus corrected His disciples on the matter of the time of the Kingdom's arrival, not on its essential nature. The commentators are much more critical of the disciples than Christ was. They would seek to change the disciples whole conception of the Kingdom; our Lord only dealt with the time of its inauguration. The disciples anticipated a literal, physical reign of our Lord upon the earth. Some Bible students would have us believe that such expectations were misguided. They suppose that Jesus spoke only of a spiritual reign in the hearts of men.

That's a rather interesting thing, because our Lord does not correct the disciple's concept of the Kingdom; He corrects their preoccupation with the timing of the Kingdom. Now if they were wrong in thinking there was a Kingdom to come after three years of teaching, they were also wrong after 40 days of post-graduate work. More than this, my friends, they were wrong after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Because one of the things you will discover later in the book of Acts is that when the apostles preached, they preached to the Jews that if they turned to Jesus as Messiah, there would be a restoration of the Kingdom.

Look, for example, in Acts chapter 3 after Pentecost. Peter and John are preaching as a result of the healing of the cripple who was outside of the temple, and who was healed. Peter says in verse 19: "Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" ([Acts 3:19](#)).

The expression 'times of refreshing,' was understood rightly by Israel as being the time of the restoration and the establishment of God's Kingdom upon earth. "And that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of the restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time" ([Acts 3:20-21](#)).

In other words, that which the Old Testament prophets had been speaking, that which our Lord Jesus came to establish, that is the message which the apostles preached. Until 70 A.D., they offered to Israel the opportunity to turn to Jesus as the Messiah, and promised that if they did, the Kingdom would be ushered in. Obviously, the nation did not repent and believe. And you understand that Israel, trying to forcibly bring the Kingdom in unbelief by rebelling against Rome, brought the power of Rome down upon them. Because of Jewish insurrection, Rome sacked that city and there was a massacre that was absolutely incredible to read about. Millions of Jews, it seems, died at that time. My point is simply this, the disciples had come to believe in a literal kingdom as a result of the teaching of our Lord, both before and after His resurrection.

Understandably, then, the disciples put this question to our Lord: “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (verse 6).

I want to underline the phrase, “at this time.” That is the issue that our Lord calls to their attention, not the issue of the nature of the Kingdom. He is dealing not with their misconceptions about the Kingdom, but with their preoccupation with the time of its coming. That is where they were wrong.

Now you must understand the circumstances in which all of this occurred. Do you remember where this took place? Not Jerusalem. It was the city outside of Jerusalem—Bethany. Bethany is where the triumphal entry began (cf. [John 12:1,9,12](#)). This is where Jesus had raised Lazarus. People had gathered not only to see Jesus, but to behold Lazarus, and it was out of all of this that the crowd came to herald Jesus as the Messiah. So it was Bethany that was the point of origin for the triumphal entry.

Now can you imagine why the disciples would bring up the subject of the coming of the Kingdom? I suppose they thought, “Here we are at Bethany again. Maybe we’re going to have the real triumphal entry this time.”

One of the seminary students suggested that the Lord had promised the coming of the Holy Spirit, and perhaps it was the fulfillment of this promise to which they also looked forward. That may be. Here they were, Jesus was raised from the dead, the subject of conversation had been the Kingdom. Now there is this promise for which they are to wait. And you know how our minds always run wild in speculation when we are waiting for something and we do not know exactly what it is. All of these things must have come together, and the disciples were almost ready to burst with anticipation. And so our Lord responded to them, not regarding their concept of the Kingdom, but regarding their preoccupation with its time: “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” ([Acts 1:7](#)).

You see, this is no correction concerning the anticipation of a physical, literal thousand-year reign. Our Lord granted that their understanding of the Kingdom was correct. He was simply saying, “Don’t get preoccupied with when it is to occur.”

There are Christians today who seem to be more interested about the precise timing of eschatological (that is, prophetic) events than they are with godly living (cf. [2 Peter 3:11-13](#)). I am not saying we should not study prophecy. I am saying we should not become preoccupied with it to the point where we ignore our duty and our obligation to live godly lives and to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is the thrust of our Lord's words in [Acts 1:7-8](#). They were not intended to know the exact time of the Lord's return and the establishment of His Kingdom. But as a result of His departure, the Holy Spirit would come, bestowing power upon them, by which they would witness to Jesus Christ at home and abroad (cf. [John 14:7ff.](#)).

In one sense the ascension is the final answer of our Lord to the question raised by the apostles. We cannot view the ascension of the Savior apart from its context with the paragraph—a section which centers in the question of the disciples concerning the coming of the Kingdom.

Verse 9 informs us that after Jesus had spoken the words of verses 7 and 8 He was taken from their sight into the heavens. The last words of Jesus concerned the matter of the Kingdom and our present responsibilities. The conversation was terminated by Jesus' departure.

But more than this the ascension itself was the most forceful and satisfying answer to the question of the disciples:

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven" ([Acts 1:9-11](#)).

The ascension was a glorious event. Our Lord disappeared into a cloud, not 'into the clouds' (cf. verse 9). It may well be that this cloud was no ordinary cloud, but rather a manifestation of the Shekinah glory, even as it took place in the transfiguration (cf. [Matthew 16:27-17:9](#), especially verse 5). Since the transfiguration was a preview of the coming Kingdom, the Kingdom must be quite similar. Now, in [Acts 1:11](#) we are told that the return of the Lord Jesus will be like that of His ascension. It, like the transfiguration, must have been glorious, but it was viewed by a larger number.

The ascension was a display of the splendor and glory of the coming Kingdom. As such it was a reassurance to the disciples that this Kingdom was the same as they had previously been instructed.

What a beautiful way to dovetail a two-fold response to this pressing question of the disciples. While they were not to be overly concerned about the timing of the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel, they were assured of its certainty and its splendor. What a gracious event the ascension was. It served as an assurance to the disciples that their hopes would be realized.

One last passage remains to be considered in our study of the ascension of Christ and its importance to us.

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, And He gave gifts to men." Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things. And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ ([Ephesians 4:7-12](#)).

The ascension was the final, incontestable evidence that Jesus Christ was the victor over Satan and his hosts. It is the measure of His victory, but also the measure of the power which has been bestowed upon His saints to carry out His work on earth until He returns.

The ascension was necessary for the Holy Spirit to come upon the church (and individual believers) in a different way than in times past ([John 16:7ff.](#)). But it was also an indication of the extent of the power which was made available to complete the task set before us.

This was a desperately needed event for who but His most intimate followers would sense most deeply His bodily absence? Who most needed assurance of His spiritual presence and power? And surely those of us who have never walked the dusty roads with Him and heard Him speak or felt His touch need this assurance as well.

Conclusion

Taking the various threads of which the doctrine of the ascension of Christ is woven we can briefly summarize its reference and application to Christians:

(1) Separation. In one sense the ascension was the bodily separation of our Lord from His followers. But we must quickly add that the Scriptures never record any mourning or tears concerning this. Undoubtedly this is true because, ironic as it may seem, our Lord's departure inaugurated a time of even greater intimacy through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. "... and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" ([Matthew 28:20](#)).

(2) Consummation. The ascension symbolized that the work which our Lord was sent to accomplish in His physical body on earth has been finished. "... when He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" ([Hebrews 1:3](#)).

(3) Glorification. When our Lord returned to the Father it was in splendor and glory. While His glory was somewhat veiled by His humble surroundings at His incarnation, His return was with even greater glory and honor because of the work He had accomplished. "Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name" ([Philippians 2:9](#)).

(4) Confirmation. The ascension was, in part, a confirmation of Christ's person and work. He returned to the Father. In this His claim to have come from the Father was vindicated. While no one could actually witness the actual incarnation of Christ in the virgin birth, His return was visible to His followers. The ascension of Christ is also a confirmation of our faith and assurance in Christ: "This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" ([Hebrews 6:19-20](#)).

(5) Transition. The ascension serves as a connecting link: between the work of Christ in salvation and that in our sanctification; between the gospels and the epistles; between what has been accomplished by Christ and what is still being done through His Spirit. It is even a transition in the ministry of Christ as well. Having completed His work on the cross in His flesh, He now intercedes for us as a sympathetic High Priest, as One Who has experienced our afflictions:

"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" ([Hebrews 5:14-16](#)).

(6) Anticipation. The ascension also creates in our hearts a sense of expectation as we realize that He will return, just as He departed: "... This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into Heaven" ([Acts 1:11](#)).

And so it is that we come to the importance of the ascension to Christians today. It is not primarily to be viewed as the conclusion of our Lord's life and ministry, but as the introduction of a new phase of His ministry through His church, empowered by His Spirit. The assurance of His return and the measure of

His presence and power in these intervening days is to be found, to a great extent, in His ascension.
What a Savior!

233 Lest anyone become upset by this statement, let me go on to say that it does have much to do with the application of men's salvation, as we shall demonstrate later.

234 It is interesting to note that during His earthly life our Lord's opposition came primarily from the scribes and Pharisees. These were men who believed in supernaturalism and such things as angels and resurrection. In the book of Acts the main thrust of the opposition came from the Sadducees, the liberals who did not believe in any resurrection (cf. [Matthew 22:23](#); [Acts 4:11](#)).

FROM THE SERIES: [HIGHLIGHTS IN THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF JESUS CHRIST](#)

[← PREVIOUS PAGE](#)

Related Topics: [Ascension](#)



[Report Inappropriate Ad](#)